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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION REPORT - France Iran Middle East -
Israel - Hamas U.S. Geo-Strategy
PARIS - Friday, March 31, 2006

(A) SUBJECTS COVERED IN TODAY'S REPORT:

France
Iran
Middle East - Israel - Hamas
U.S. Geo-Strategy

B) SUMMARY OF COVERAGE:

Last evening's announcement from the Council of State that the CPE legislation is constitutional is today's lead story, with variations: Le Figaro states that "President Chirac Will Now Promulgate the Law," and entitles its editorial "Chirac's Choice" while La Tribune says he "should" promulgate it today. Les Echos says Chirac is on the "Front Line" and La Croix titles: "Chirac Will Have to Make the Difference." While Liberation headlines "The Temptation of Force," the popular press focuses on the impact to the streets: "A Green Light for Blows" reads France Soir, while Le Parisien leads with: "The Fever Is Mounting." President Chirac is expected to address the nation this evening at 8PM. Meanwhile the unions remain firm about the need to withdraw the CPE as they confer about next Tuesday's day of protest. Most editorials are devoted to this story. (See Part C) In La Croix a political expert contends that the crisis has weakened interior Minister Sarkozy as much as PM Villepin.

Most dailies announce the UNSC decision to grant Iran one month to accept its conditions and stop its uranium enrichment. The fact that the UNSC is divided about the sanctions issues is noted. Le Figaro titles its article "Iran Lends a Deaf Ear to UN" (See Part C) and quotes Secretary Rice from Berlin: "I do not think it is appropriate at this time to talk of sanctions." Secretary Rice's meeting with President Chirac is noted in a separate boxed article: "President Chirac emphasized a 'convergence of views' with Washington . during a one hour meeting essentially devoted to nuclear issues. President Chirac expressed his 'concern' on the subject, but insisted that 'France was satisfied with the UNSC resolution.' Secretary Rice went on to Great Britain, the last leg of her

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European trip."

The Israeli elections elicits a commentary in Le Figaro entitled "With Olmert, Israel Enters the Era of Managers" while in Liberation former socialist FM Hubert Vedrine pens an op-ed on "the new chances for Israel." In Le Figaro EU correspondent Alexandrine Bouilhet pens an article entitled "Transatlantic Disagreement on Hamas" and explains how "despite a compromise, the Quartet is still divided as to what strategy to adopt." (See Part C)

France Soir carries an op-ed penned by its President Jacques Soppelsa entitled "The Paris-Moscow Axis: A Guardrail Against Hegemony." (See Part C)

The liberation of U.S. journalist Jill Carroll is reported in Le Figaro, La Croix, France Soir and Liberation, which says "she still doesn't know who kidnapped her or why. Their demands, political on the surface, probably hid a demand for ransom. Secretary Rice expressed her 'great joy.' at the liberation." The article lists the other hostages still in Iraq.

Le Figaro reports on the Christian Afghan who has found refuge in Italy: "Berlusconi is a lucky guy. With ten days to go before the legislative elections, he will try to milk to story for all it is worth." La Croix in its article comments: "Just when the right and the left are courting the votes from the Catholic electorate, this operation raises some questions."

(C) SUPPORTING TEXT/BLOCK QUOTES:

France

"Chirac's Choice"

Alexis Brezet in right-of-center Le Figaro (03/31): "The umpire has spoken: by validating the CPE legislation, the Council of State is helping Villepin to score politically against the Socialist Party. But at the same time it is putting Chirac before one of the most crucial choices of his career. Will he promulgate the legislation, or take another road, whatever it is called - suspension, withdrawal or revision. The consequences of his action must be measured. If the latter, it is difficult to imagine Villepin staying on in the government. For Chirac, having to name another PM after the shock of the referendum would carry unimaginable consequences. If he does promulgate the law, as is his role as guardian of France's institutions, he must also look reality in the face. It is up to him to make the unions believe in the power of negotiations and change. But the social malaise goes beyond the CPE. Negotiations must be launched on employment and the training of our youth. Can the unions, at this point, still take Chirac's extended hand? Nothing proves it, yet for France we must hope it is still possible."

Iran

"Iran Deaf to UN"

Alain Barluet in right-of-center Le Figaro (03/31): "Despite the international community's mobilization, Iran is not giving in on its nuclear program. While the UNSC sent its ultimatum to Iran, it remained divided on the prospect of using sanctions against Tehran. This was illustrated in the negotiations needed to put together the final text in which it is stipulated that the IAEA and not the UNSC conserves the central role in the final decision. A request made by China and Russia, which have also obtained that a paragraph on future punitive measures be excluded. The final declaration also omits the fact that nuclear proliferation represents a threat to international peace and security."

Middle East - Israel - Hamas

"New Chances for Israel"

Former socialist PM Hubert Vedrine in left-of-center Liberation (03/31): "The end of the Likud's supremacy and with it of its dream of Greater Israel, which weighed in on the entire region, is an event of considerable importance and a bearer of hope. In leaving the Likud and pulling out of Gaza, Sharon did away with a major obstacle. There is little to be expected from the evanescent 'international community' or from the ghostly Quartet. But what can individual nations, those with power, the U.S., France, the EU, Russia and certain Arab countries, accomplish? They can encourage Israel to go further in dismantling settlements and pulling out of occupied territories. And convince them to go from unilateralism to negotiations. As regards the U.S. and Europe, they must formulate and make clear the guarantees that can be offered to both sides in the name of peace and help them both in their development, side by side."

"Transatlantic Disagreement Over Hamas Financing"

Alexandrine Bouilhet in right-of-center Le Figaro (03/31): "A new transatlantic rift has erupted in the last few hours regarding the financing of Hamas. It was made clear in the trimmed down declaration made by the Quartet after bitter discussions. The text is a compromise between the U.S. and European positions, threatening the Palestinian Authority with sanctions and a boycott but without giving a deadline. The wording, which can be interpreted in different ways and which demonstrates no immediate involvement on the ground for the short term, hides a basic disagreement between the members of the Quartet. Says a EU diplomat: 'the Americans want to asphyxiate Hamas, to make it fail, while the Europeans hope the movement will change its ways, as did the PLO in the past.' Caught between the Americans and the Russians, the Europeans remain hopeful and refuse to pull the plug. They believe the time for making a difficult decision is getting close."

U.S. Geo-Strategy

"The Paris-Moscow Axis, a Guardrail Against Hegemony"

Jacques Soppelsa President of France Soir (03/31): "Fifteen years after the first Gulf War, one can only look at the results of unilateralism. Through the concrete examples of the Balkans, the Middle East, the unbelievable imbroglio of Afghanistan and the Iraqi quagmire, America's unilateralism and its famous Pax Americana present a balance sheet that raise more and more questions. In this context, Russia looks like the one that could contribute, through its ties with France, 'Old Europe's' leading power, to a re-balancing of international geo-strategy. and the establishment of a guardrail against Washington's hegemonic tendencies, which would be in the best interest of the U.S. The Paris-Moscow axis, far from being a weapon of war against Washington, could help the White House to stay on this side of the yellow line."

STAPLETON